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“One World, Many Voices”



be astounded by the endless reserves of Laitman's musical imagination as well as her unerring instincts for setting texts with sensitivity and grace.

We hear from two other composers on this recording. The disk opens with a heartfelt, deeply expressive work for solo clarinet, "Un Seul," which Kalmen Opperman (1919–2010) composed in 2000 for his most famous clarinet student, Richard Stoltzman. It is an ideal way for this recording to open, because allows the listener to bask in the special, simple beauty of this instrument. The recording closes with "Winter Rain," a lovely setting of a Christina Rossetti poem that reminds us of how rainfall is followed by the green promise of spring. The music is by Diana Rosenblum, a composition student at Eastman who happens to be the daughter of Lori Laitman. One cannot help but be tremendously excited by her rich potential.

Soprano Kristine Hurst-Wajszczuk possesses a sizable, colorful voice with a distinctive shimmer. There is also commendable clarity in her singing as well as rich expressiveness. One might only wish for more radiant ease on top and more pristine intonation. Clarinetist Denise Gainey plays masterfully no matter what is asked of her, and is everything one would want in a musical collaborator. There are detailed program notes on every work as well as complete texts.

This is a very special release.

Heaven and Earth: A Duke Ellington Songbook. Danielle Talamantes, soprano; Henry Dehlinger, piano. (MSR Jazz MS 1617; 50:57)

"Come Sunday," "Imagine my Frustration," "In a Sentimental Mood," "Do Nothin' Till You Hear From

Me," "Prelude to a Kiss," "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," "Sophisticated Lady," "I'm Beginning to See the Light," "Solitude," "Meditation," "Heaven," "Almighty God has those Angels."

There was a time when any mention of a composer such as Duke Ellington in the pages of the *Journal of Singing* would have been a shocking departure from the norm. Needless to say, both NATS and the JOS have dramatically broadened their scope of interest in recent years, and we are all better for it. Thank goodness that we live in an era in which the inclusion of a Duke Ellington album in this column strikes us as entirely appropriate and downright ordinary.

Fortunately, however, there is nothing ordinary about this recording or the performances contained therein. It is an exhilarating feast of superb songs by one of America's most important and influential musical geniuses, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899–1974.) Scott Parrish, in his excellent liner notes, calls Ellington "a colossus among American composers of any genre," who created more than one thousand compositions during his long and distinguished career. Parrish goes on to explain how many of Ellington's vocal songs initially would be conceived as instrumental singles with lyrics added well after the fact to bring, in Parrish's words, "another sparkling and sometimes startling dimension to the captivating saga. Whether an instrumental or vocal arrangement, these pieces carry away the listener with Ellington's uniquely transcendent, supremely evocative and unequalled style."

We are treated to a dozen Duke Ellington songs that are much more than a predictable compendium of

greatest hits. They span every period of his long career and represent a number of facets of his artistry. Several of the songs are familiar favorites, but most of the rest are drawn from the vast well of great Ellington songs that have fallen into some measure of obscurity. It is a sensible balance that will leave the typical listener sated, yet hungry for more.

Two of the singers mentioned in the liner notes are the legendary Mahalia Jackson and Ella Fitzgerald, and it is voices of that ilk that readily come to mind when one thinks of the jazz greats like Duke Ellington. It may then come as a bit of a shock when one begins playing this disk and hears the kind of voice to which these songs have been entrusted. Danielle Talamantes has the kind of crystalline soprano sound that one might associate with Mozart's Susanna or even Richard Strauss's Sophie. Her operatic résumé actually boasts somewhat beefier roles like Donna Anna, but in this context we seem to be hearing her in more delicate terms. Her sound is clear as a bell, flows with liquid ease and evenness, and is unfailingly lovely in every register. What a pleasure to hear these songs sung by such a technically sound singer who is also an exceptionally expressive and imaginative musician. With her every step of the way is Henry Dehlinger, who can count himself as both an accomplished pianist and singer. Certainly, his playing has a lovely singing quality to it, and he also melds seamlessly with the soprano at every turn. No singer could ask for a more able collaborator.

Beyond his flawless playing, Dehlinger reveals himself to be an exceptionally skilled arranger in several of the songs collected here. This is especially true with "Come Sunday," the song that opens the disk. Dehlinger's

arrangement begins with an exquisite introduction reminiscent of Claude Debussy's impressionist masterwork, "Reflet dans l'eau." Ellington and Debussy might seem like strange bedfellows, but it works brilliantly. Just as impressive is how Dehlinger weaves together those fragile pastel shades with the bold brassiness of stride piano. In lesser hands, the result would be musical chaos; Dehlinger makes it work perfectly. Other arrangers contributing to this collection's excellence include Caren Levine and Larry Ham. Drawing the disk to a brilliant close is Ellington's original arrangement of his thundering "Almighty God has those Angels" from his *Second Sacred Concert*. This is one of several tracks devoted to Ellington's sacred music, a facet of his *oeuvre* that merits much more attention.

There are no texts included in the booklet, but the perfect clarity of Talamantes's diction render them unnecessary. Fortunately, the liner notes include revelatory background information on each song, including the one piano solo on this disk, the sublime "Meditation." It is just one more reason to enjoy this magnificent collection.

Mark Abel: *The Cave of Wondrous Voice*. Hila Plitmann, soprano; David Shifrin, clarinet; Sarah Beck, English horn; Fred Sherry, cello; Sabrina-Vivian Höpcker, violin; Carol Rosenberger, Dominic Cheli, piano. (Delos DE 3570; 68:08)

"Intuition's Dance." *Four Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva*: "The Sybil," "Two trees desire to come together," "O sorrow floods my eyes!," "God bent under." *The Elastic Hours*: "What Friday Brought," "Saturday's Cir-

cumference." *Clarinet Trio*: "The Unfolding," "Taking Flight," "In Good Time."

In the liner notes for *The Cave of Wondrous Voice*, composer Mark Abel explains how he came to love chamber music because of his father's tireless devotion to the chamber works of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Dvorak. One is unlikely to hear much in these works that brings any of those masters and their music to mind, but that is just as well. The world needs fresh and distinctive voices in the realm of chamber music, and Abel possesses such a voice. This collection is a refreshing and rhapsodic celebration of the particular joys that can be found in well crafted and imaginatively conceived chamber works.

The reason this particular column is taking up this disk is because of the one vocal work included here, *Four Poems of Marina Tsvetaeva*. A striking and intriguing score, it serves as an enticing introduction to one of the twentieth century's most gifted and tragic writers. Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) endured sorrows and deprivation that most of us can scarcely imagine, and her poetry reflects the dramatic upheaval of her homeland as well as the mounting losses of her personal life that eventually drove her to suicide. Tsvetaeva's remarkable life and legacy actually inspired the creation of an opera, *Marina: A Captive Spirit*, by composer Deborah Drattell and librettist Annie Finch. Hers is a story that deserves to be much better known.

Abel tells us that very few composers have taken up the poetry of Tsvetaeva, and that there appears to have been no settings of her poetry in English translation before this. "She needs and deserves further advocacy,"

Abel says in his liner notes, "and I consider my cycle a uniquely American representation to her work." Tsvetaeva was a boldly innovative writer, but one can appreciate how prospective composers might be intimidated by the prospect of setting her words to music. Abel is to be commended for taking up the challenge and bringing his considerable gifts and skills to bear. These songs are haunting and deeply poignant, serving up one arresting soundscape after another. Abel's settings are for soprano, English horn, and piano, an ideal combination of timbres that the composer combines with impressive care.

Perhaps the most problematic of the four songs is the first, "The Sybil." There is a quirky strangeness in the poem that Abel thoroughly embraces, but the jumpy, restless melodic line does not necessarily serve the text very well when it comes to plain old clarity. There is also the punishingly high tessitura that renders many of the words all but indecipherable, despite soprano Hila Plitmann's admirable efforts. Still, the song has potent impact, thanks to Abel's melodic and harmonic inventiveness. The three subsequent songs are beautifully fashioned and impressively sung. Especially poignant is "O sorrow floods my eyes," a setting of a poem that Tsvetaeva wrote in the wake of the brutal Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939. The poet seems to be speaking for the millions of people who were powerless to prevent their homeland from being engulfed by devastation but who were grimly determined to resist their invaders in any way they could. One stanza of the poem is especially memorable:

I won't consent—to be
In this hell of monstrous stares.